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ABSTRACT

The paper examines self-esteem, what contributes to it, why it is important, and ways to build it in children, especially those with disabilities. Definitions of four basic terms (self-esteem, body image, unconditional acceptance, and active-reflective listening) are offered. Guidelines for teachers and parents are then offered in the form of answers to the following frequently asked questions: what is self esteem? are certain children particularly at risk for low self-esteem? how is body image important as part of self-esteem? what can teachers do to help improve self-esteem in their students? what is "respectful" discipline? what can parents do to improve their child's self-esteem? how can school counselors help improve students' self-esteem? why is teacher self-esteem important? what can cause poor self-esteem in teachers? what are some self-esteem building activities? Appended is a self-rating questionnaire for teachers. Nine references are listed. (DB)

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TITLE: SELF-ESTEEM

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ABSTRACT: This module contains information on self-esteem--what it is, what contributes to it, why it is important, and suggested ideas and activities for building it in children.

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SELF-ESTEEM

Overview

Self-esteem is an important factor in student performance and teacher effectiveness. It can be enhanced by changing fundamental philosophical attitudes on the part of teachers, parents, and administrators to a more positive and respectful stance. This module includes tips to help effect that change, plus suggestions for self-esteem building activities and resources.

Definitions/Terminology

Self-esteem	Favorable self-regard; self-respect; self-acceptance.
Body image	How a child views his/her body as a part of self-concept. The opinion a child has of his/her body has a large influence on his/her self-esteem.
Unconditional acceptance	Accepting a child exactly as he/she is, with no conditions he/she must fulfill before being acceptable.
Active-reflective listening	A style of listening that focuses all attention on the person speaking; listens for feelings behind what is being said and reflects back in a non-judgmental manner what was heard to show that the listener understood what was said.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

A. Self-esteem forms a solid foundation on which to build success in life. It is a basic component of personality and has a major impact on interpersonal relationships. How children feel about themselves projects to others and influences the way others view them and relate to them. A strong feeling of self-worth helps children use their potential abilities and live productive lives. Self-esteem also helps children think for themselves and resist pressure toward dangerous experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Q. ARE CERTAIN CHILDREN PARTICULARLY AT RISK FOR LOW SELF-ESTEEM?

A. Children with learning disabilities, physical handicaps, and disruptive problems in their families, such as alcoholism, are especially at risk. Although these factors do not preclude a good self-concept and feelings of self-worth, children with characteristics that may produce low self-esteem should receive extra assistance in esteem building.

Q. HOW IS BODY IMAGE IMPORTANT AS PART OF SELF-ESTEEM?

A. Probably the earliest source of self-concept is a child's body, and how it interacts with his/her environment. Even if a handicapping condition exists, it does not usually cause a poor body image until the child has others with whom to compare his/her body and discovers that it is different. Rousso (1984) pointed out that, "This is not a one-time discovery with single meaning for the child. Rather, like the discovery of genital differences, it is a discovery which the child keeps making at different ages, with different developmental meanings" (pp. 10-11). Attitudes of significant others in the child's life can greatly influence the child's self-esteem. The more accepting they are of the child's body and the less the treat him/her as "different", the better the child's chances are of gaining self-esteem.

Q. WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO HELP IMPROVE SELF-ESTEEM IN THEIR STUDENTS?

A. Here are some pointers recommended by many authors (Canfield & Wells, 1976; Huitt & Pattison, 1980; Stixrud, 1987):

1) Try to instill in them the belief that they CAN develop competence and that it's okay to make mistakes.

2) Stop using red markers to highlight mistakes. Use them instead to point out things the student did right.

3) Focus on the process of learning, not the product of grades.

4) Reduce comparison and competition among students, emphasizing cooperation instead.

5) Provide a climate of warmth, attention, and emotional support, giving positive feedback often.

6) Use praise to describe the accomplishment rather than the person; i.e., accomplishments should not be the measure of student's worth.

7) Accept all efforts and contributions non-judgmentally.

8) Help create opportunities for students to verbalize their own worth and talk about their successes.

9) Encourage student responsiveness and involvement in the learning process.

10) Accept the fact that changing self-concept is a slow process and takes time.

11) Try to create an environment of mutual support and caring where students feel safe to express themselves.

12) Use "respectful" discipline--discipline that maintains a high level of respect for students, recognizing that fear and punishment are not effective motivators for learning.

13) Do whatever you can to maintain or build your own self-esteem, such as forming a teacher support group. (See Appendix A for a Self-Rating Questionnaire for Teachers.)

Q. WHAT IS "RESPECTFUL" DISCIPLINE?

A. It is discipline that shows respect for the child and allows him/her to maintain self-respect. Here are some pointers:

1) Discipline the child in private; do not humiliate a child in front of the class.

2) Let the child know that he/she made a poor decision, not that he/she is a bad person.

3) Whenever possible, let the consequences be known ahead of time.

4) Make sure that the consequences are appropriate to the child's poor decision.

5) Try to maintain consistency in discipline, so that the child knows what to expect.

Q. WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO IMPROVE THEIR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM?

A. 1) Provide a daily dose of UNCONDITIONAL acceptance and love. Show your children you love them as they are without pressure to be "different" or "better."

2) Set aside a special time for each child to have undivided attention, without any teaching or scolding. For example, talk about and listen to the events of the child's day just before bedtime.

3) Provide each child with an area that is his/her very own. If it cannot be an entire room, a drawer or shelf would do.

4) Help your children develop a sense of family unity and "roots." Do things as a family often; recreation such as family trips, games, and walks all strengthen the family. Tell family stories at dinnertime, focusing on family members' successes.

5) Teach responsibility by letting children contribute to family chores even before they are able to be effective at it. For example, drying the unbreakable dishes or feeding the family pet are ways in which a young child can contribute to family life.

6) Show your children that you are interested in them by becoming involved in school or community activities that affect them, such as PTA, scouting, or sports events.

7) Work on building your own self-esteem. Take advantage of parenting classes or parent support groups offered at local schools or churches.

Q. HOW CAN SCHOOL COUNSELORS HELP IMPROVE STUDENTS' SELF-ESTEEM?

A. In addition to providing guidance in coursework and vocational goals, here are some other suggestions as to how school counselors can help students build self-esteem:

1) Create an atmosphere of acceptance in which students feel free to express themselves and say whatever they want to say--a "safe space" to communicate.

2) Use active-reflective listening to help them explore their feelings, clarify their values, and learn to solve their own personal and interpersonal problems. With active-reflective listening, the counselor reflects back to the student his/her perception of the problem, then helps the student explore and choose options to handle the problem.

3) Listen empathically, but trust that the student can be his/her own best problem solver.

4) Recognize that frequently students' feelings of upset are transitory and need to be heard, acknowledged, and accepted before they will pass.

5) Promote a warm relationship which facilitates the development of self-direction, self-responsibility, and independence.

Q. WHY IS TEACHER SELF-ESTEEM IMPORTANT?

A. Teachers with high self-esteem are more effective teachers. Since they are comfortable with themselves, they can be more accepting and non-judgmental with their students. They feel that what they are doing is worthwhile and as they value themselves, they value their students as well.

Q. WHAT CAN CAUSE POOR SELF-ESTEEM IN TEACHERS?

A. A major factor in low self-esteem is teacher "burnout," which Edelwich & Brodsky (1980) explain as, "a progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of the conditions of their work. Those conditions range from insufficient training to client overload, from too many hours to too little pay, from inadequate funding to ungrateful clients, from bureaucratic or political constraints to the inherent gap between aspiration and accom-

plishment" (p. 14). To handle burnout, first recognize that it is likely to occur, then try to re-direct the energy created by the frustration. For example, talk to fellow teachers and look for ways to help support each other. Remember to focus on successes and not on mistakes.

Q. WHAT ARE SOME SELF-ESTEEM BUILDING ACTIVITIES?

A. The following is a list of activities adapted from Canfield & Wells (1976), 100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom, an excellent resource for self-esteem building activities.

1) Have your students make a list of things they have done that they are proud of. This can be a large group activity where things are written on the board, or a small group activity in which pairs of students tell each other the things they are proud of.

2) Create a special bulletin board titled, "THINGS I'M PROUD OF" to display student accomplishments.

3) Write a simple class newsletter, making sure there is some news about each member of the class.

4) Pair up students who are competent in a given area with students who are having trouble with that area and let them help each other. (One who teaches also learns.) This can be especially effective in reducing prejudice in the tutee and building confidence in the tutor if the tutor is handicapped.

5) Have students draw pictures of themselves doing something that makes them feel good about themselves.

6) Ask students to write letters describing themselves to pen pals they have never met. Have them focus on things they like about themselves.

Appendix A

SELF-RATING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

Directions: Answer "yes" or "no".

_____ 1. Do I really care and let my students know?

_____ 2. Do I really listen to my students and hear what they say?

_____ 3. Do students bring their personal problems to me?

_____ 4. Do I try to make each student feel important?

_____ 5. Can I tell when a student is "uptight" and respond to his/her feelings?

_____ 6. Do I get my students to think instead of just responding to a question?

_____ 7. Do all my students participate in the class?

_____ 8. Can I admit my own mistakes openly?

_____ 9. Do my students and I feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of the year rather than merely a feeling of relief?

_____ 10. Do students learn from my tests, instead of memorizing and then forgetting?

_____ 11. Do I keep my students from getting bored or going to sleep in my class?

_____ 12. Do I let my students know they are missed when they are absent from class?

_____ 13. Is there an orderly climate for learning in my classroom?

_____ 14. Do I emphasize learning more than discipline?

SOURCE: Huitt, F., & Pattison, P. (1980). Self-esteem and the handicapped student. Des Moines, IA: Midwest Regional Resource Center.

If you can answer "yes" to eight or more questions, pat yourself on the back.

If you answer "no" to eight or more questions, your own self-esteem might need some attention.

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